

燃点 Ran Dian

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“As we remember and abstract in the dark” On Cici Wu’s Umbrascape Art

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Cici Wu
Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)
June 25–August 6, 2021 at 47 Canal

Proxémie/Proxemics

Nighttime: I get into bed, I turn off the light, I lie back under the covers to go to sleep. But I need to blow my nose. I reach out in the dark and successfully locate the top drawer of my bedside table; I open the drawer and with the same assurance find the handkerchief on the right-hand side. I put it back and close the drawer again just as infallibly.

This is the kind of episode that enables us to formulate a notion of proxemics.

THE NOTION

Neologism coined by Edward Twitchell Hall (The Hidden Dimension, 1966; French translation in 1971). Proxemics = “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture”; dialectics of distance. For my part, I shall restrict my use of the word to the very localized space of the subject’s immediate surroundings: the familiar space... [– Roland Barthes, How to Live Together: Novelistic simulations of Some Everyday Spaces, p.111]

Christmas is coming, and this year is ending with some of us holding up alright, sort of.

Christmas trees, however small, should not be without lanterns, some might say, and they might be right, how about then those festive greens and snowy nights inside a lantern? You could get one, too.

Collecting is recollecting in reverse order. Recalling Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness), Cici Wu’s last exhibition last summer on the 2nd floor of that building, “a prelude on the dissolution of light” (Press Release), I remember that immediate impression I had upon entering the gallery: that nocturnal coziness, a min-holiness made mobile, how an ambience can be such an artful enigma in itself, I remember sending a mental note to myself. Later the QR code on the wall says:

The humble lantern structures familiar feeling, an art of stateless memory that casts undefined shapes and shadows as we remember and abstract in the dark.



Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+852 bunny), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

The varying shapes of the lanterns are derived from popular folk symbols across cultures: a star, a rabbit, a lotus, a pagoda, to name a few. They hang glowing and suspended [...]. Embedded in a few of the lanterns are specially programmed, open-source digital cameras, a new kind of optic device initiated by Wu to record the contours of shadows.

“As we remember and abstract in the dark” ... what, exactly?

THE LAMP

Cited here as an object-center, a crystallizer of proxemics: [...] produces a lit being and a dark nothingness → through a paradoxical but logical reversal, it is in complete darkness that the habitual gesture is exposed: darkness can create the very essence of

proxemics. [...] The essence of myself, it's what I don't even need to see to take pleasure in.

– Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, p.112

Imagine a cave, pre-Platonic cinematic, where a fire itself had to be made somewhere before someone could start talking about some such. Imagine a spark, striking flint with a rock, something nowadays a match or a power cord could do more instantly. Lanterns, appearing somewhere in between in the cultural evolutionary history of optical devices, take up quite a uniquely misty, enduring position. Used by the barrel-dwelling hippie philosopher Diogenes (412/404 BCE-323 BCE), for instance, who also became famous for his street search for a philosopher, the lantern that helps you see a sea of things at night moves with you like a magnetic lighthouse.



TS (Celestials), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

Welcoming dusks and greeting dawns, a lantern keeps you company in between, wherever you are headed or settled. Consider, for instance, the seasonal location of Yuan Xiao Festival (The Chinese Lantern Festival), the fifteenth day of the first month (Yuan) in the lunar calendar, the end of the Lunar New Year that marks the first full

moon of the lunar year. This colorful, typically red, Deng Long (Chinese Lantern) “public art,” I would say, an annual, Buddhist-inspired ritual that started in Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) as a communal trick with which to protect this fragile lifeworld from the divine or imperial wrath (depending on which legend you choose to follow, look it up for yourself), is in itself a living allegory of survival, of lives to be secured and sustained.



Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+63 prototype), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

Contained yet uncontainable, necessarily utilitarian yet diffusively ephemeral, the lantern “produces a lit being, a dark nothingness” (Roland Barthes, see above) irreducible to a being or a nothingness; as an adjacent object, it works like an adjective, rendering beings visible in its glowing specificities. Its mobile techno-naturalism, archetypically prefigured in our ancestral cave-dwelling hunter-gatherers sitting around fires and ancient Chinese “homemakers” or “gatekeepers,” so to speak, follows the quotidian rhythm of this endless manifold shadow plays we call time, and its ambient ambiguity that also allows spaces of literature to unfold reflects the generic structure

and material density of our basic humanness tied, in turn, to technicity, particularly archival.



Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+62 prototype), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

This way, Wu's paper-based umbragraphic art becomes reflectively archaeological. Wu's narrative drawings and semi-automated shadow-tracking animations, staged and streamed at once, are materially interactive and interactively dynamic, and audible along the way, in some subtextual way, are the artist's transculturally inflected responses to the helio-photo-centric history of seeing, cinematic, in particular. Implicitly performed and programmed in this subtle counter-light show of porous animateriality is an interstitial meditation on and whispers across the 24/7 imMEDIACy of our contemporary visual culture in which modern colonialism and global capitalism are embedded. The contoured minimalism and muted luminosity of Wu's umbragraphia comes from the invisible gaze and energy of an-other(wise reverse- or counter-)imagineering storyteller lodged in each object thus connected, each allegorizing such survival tactics of alter-native space-making, solitary or social. Stretching this other allegory of the mobile cave a bit further in contemporary idioms as well, we might as well say that each lantern is (in/beside) a cave, a table, a bed, a spot, a pixel, a room, a street, a city, a world inside and outside your iphonicly-charged pocket.



installation view. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

Such uncanny, serially materialized “foreign objectness,” to borrow this “potent image from Wu’s pieces so titled and itemized, anchors her poetics of transitorily illuminated dwelling. Those fire-handling, lantern-holding, animal-herding hands in each portable body of optical vibration dissolve into time, vestigially, and just when they become floating signifiers in this mélange lounge of time, their gestural traces become part of the shadow plays the exhibition space frames and animates on multiple registers. Here, legibility meets obscurity in the algorithm of time, and you could be intimate with it, or indifferent to it, depending on your existential relation to each, such, moment.

At the heart of this semioptics—semi-optics, and semiosis & optics—of gently phosphorous bodies, on which Wu’s twinkly stars reflect, is a sense of community, communion and communication, a constellation in the microcosmic sense as well. How to be alone and together, visibly or otherwise, and where to position oneself, in the age of mass, rapid, and often forced migrations on the planetary scale: while the question itself could be so ordinary, so banally “modern” even, the renewed urgency of the call itself remains cuttngly contemporary today. What would it mean to do site-specific art today, for instance, in the age of the pandemic, when the precarity and fragility of our daily life has become as radical as the tokenized non-fungibility of a really virtualized and virtually real life? Who moves and why, and not? Where and when do the locational specificities of the show, not just the postal address, “47 Canal, 291 Grand St #2nd, New York, NY 10002, USA,” but a contextual fact, e.g., Chinatown in New York in the middle of it all, figure in our appreciation and understanding of it, solo or collective? And

how, how deeply, could one be there there in solid-arity with “us” in this real climate crisis together ... if not in the very amplification, trans-resonation?



installation view. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

Lantern Strike.

So I also recall noting there the choreographic subtlety with which each object and image in Wu’s show is put in relation and distinction to one another, then noting how and where the artist’s attention unfolds. In Wu’s thoughtfully executed exploration of the expanded cinematicity of the experience of quotidian spacetime in motion, in this kind of post-cinematic nano-homeland, each socially distant and connected translucent entity plugged into USB cords embodies a certain wirelessly “paper-thin” paradox, a structurally animated paradoxical sentiment of the times we are living through as well. What we sense there, and here, is a semiotic nearness—irreducibly fragile and resilient, dear neighborliness—of digitALONEness, digital aloneness and digital oneness.



installation view. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

This is where animatronics, cybernetics and proxemics come together as if hanging out together on some multiple intersecting platforms, in the concrete abstract, which is where I see Wu's compositional signature is. If this artificial bunny that glows grows on you, that is not just because you are a sentimental creature of comfort called a human being but rather because there is some photosynthetic resonance between you and the electrobunny, and what matters is such common animaterialities in this universe or that metaverse or wherever. The internet of bunnified things mirrors the infrared core of bunny fragmentations including each other's innumerable singularities in digital and postdigital environments. Perhaps then, this inner bunny-outer bunny contraction could also be part of an evolving generational fable,* flatness fighting its own flatness, heart-to-heart.

And here we go, Wu's semioptic, umbragraphic art stops to tune in ... to your "strong loneliness."



Strong Loneliness, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, Photo courtesy: Joerg Lohse

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A transdisciplinary, translingual and transcontinental scholar whose innovative work has been supported by faculty fellowships and visiting appointments from Cambridge University, CUNY Graduate Center, KIAS, the Mellon Foundation, the NEH, Seoul National University and Yanbian University among others, her art-integrated philopoetic texts have appeared in AICA-USA Magazine, Asian American Literary Review, The

Brooklyn Rail, Flash Art, Meiji Review, PN Review, Randian, The Volta and The White Review as well as various academic venues.

An avid reader, currently she serves as the co-editor of philoSOPHIA: A Journal of transContinental Feminism and is also on the boards of Asian Journal of Women's Studies, Belladonna*, Bloomsbury Studies in Critical Poetics, Derrida Today, Litmus Press, Open Humanities Press, Simon de Beauvoir Studies and Women's Studies Quarterly. Most recently, she published Queenzenglish.mp3: poetry | philosophy | performativity (2021), a Mellon-funded anthology with contributions from 50+ poets, artists and theorists from across the globe, and currently she is working on a sequel.

*Speaking of a generational mood or MO: there was also a show by Wong Ping a few blocks away at the New Museum, Your Silent Neighbor (June 30 – October 3, 2021). How Wong Ping's ugly-cute fat-flat bunnies, with their claustrophobic intensity and comedic hyperbole, boly, come to personify and complicate the ethos of the youthfully-involuted Tang Ping (lying flat) practice, supposedly a trend these days that of course cannot just be a "trend," is another topic that compels an analysis. Yet here, as part of a (slightly un)seasonal reading of Wu's work in context, I'd like to draw the reader's attention, just indexically for now, to such curious resonances between Wong's and Wu's works, where neighborhood and selfhood remain twin concerns ... of those foreign objective bunnies.